*John Lewis*

# Why I Said What I Did

Post 5/5/95

A recent speech I delivered during the welfare reform debate has drawn much comment and criticism. I am disturbed by the frequent distortion of my words. In the speech, I cited a quote by a German theologian during World War II. He spoke of the need to speak out on behalf of those who are singled out for attack, be it for reasons of politics, religion, ethnicity, race or economic status.

Unfortunately, some columnists and Republican politicians have mischaracterized and misrepresented my speech. They cite my use of the quote as the worst type of "angry rhetoric." Some have gone so far as to say I called the Republicans Nazis. I did no such thing. Here is part of my speech, including the quote.

"I am reminded [by the Republican welfare proposal] of a quote by the great German theologian, Martin Niemoller, during World War II.

" 'In Germany, they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.'

"Mr. Speaker, this Republican proposal certainly isn't the Holocaust. But I am concerned—and I must speak up."

And I did speak up—just as I have done throughout my life. When I have witnessed injustice or a disenfranchised group being oppressed, I have spoken up. From the Freedom Rides to the March on Washington to the March from Selma to Montgomery, I worked long and hard for the civil rights of all Americans. Today, as a member of Congress, I continue to speak out for the rights of those who are being oppressed—be they old or young; rich or poor; gay or straight; white, black, yellow, red or brown.

This is why I am so pained by the misuse of my speech on welfare. Once again, I rose against the attacks on the poor and disenfranchised. Yes, I became emotional during the debate. I believe the Republican proposal lacks compassion, that it is an angry and mean proposal which ostracizes those who have been left out and left behind. I had to speak up.

Unfortunately, the Republican welfare reform proposal is symptomatic of a greater sense of anger and intolerance that is growing in our nation. Too often, the "solution" to today's problems is to blame someone else—the poor, minorities, environmentalists, feminists, immigrants, bureaucrats. We are all familiar with the list. The "politics of blame" is a basic tactic of those who preach intolerance and division.

Neither I nor my speech deserves to be associated with the anger and hatred that too often pervade our society. My critics have misinterpreted my speech on welfare reform at best and mischaracterized and distorted it for political gain at worst. It is exactly this kind of demonization and distortion that make the American people cynical about their government and its institutions.

I am not one of hate's disciples. Since the day I first heard Dr. Martin Luther King's voice on the radio, I have been dedicated to helping build the beloved community, a nation in which people are judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a long history of building bridges, of bringing people together. I preach the gospel not just of tolerance but of acceptance and love. I have sacrificed blood and sweat working for fundamental human rights. I risked my life for these ends.

I have witnessed the success we can achieve when we overcome our differences, stop blaming others and work for the common good. Thanks to the civil rights movement, every American is free to exercise his or her right to vote. Today, children of all races and ethnicities attend school together. We are no longer confronted with the signs that divide our world into "white" and "colored."

It is unfortunate and ironic that I and my speech are cited as examples of hatred. I was speaking out against the same hate speech of which I am accused. The Niemoller quote is a profound statement that urges us to say "no" to the assault I believe the Republicans are unleashing on America's most vulnerable citizens. I believe a second quote from my welfare speech, one with which I chose to close, captures the spirit of my speech and my beliefs.

"A famous rabbi, Rabbi Hillel, once asked, 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I?'

"What am I, Mr. Speaker? I am for those who are in the dawn of life—the children. I am for those who are in the twilight of life—the elderly. I am for those who are in the shadow of life—the sick, the needy and the handicapped."

What am I? I am a man who deeply believes in compassion and hope. A man who believes we can move beyond the anger, hatred and attacks that have assaulted our nation's psyche. A man who, day after day, struggles to build the bridges that will allow us all to come together in Dr. King's beloved community.

---

*The writer is a Democratic representative from Georgia.*